

## If the walls could talk: Oatlands Court House Case 2: Richard Ennis, alia Long Mick



Figure 1: Wallpaper ca 1855 discovered in the Judges Chamber (layer 2 of 18), Oatlands Supreme Court House. This wallpaper was chosen to provide a suitable grandeur for the Judge's Room, achieved through the use of brilliant blue which had, until the early 1850s, been far too expensive for wallpaper.

Last week's case study considered the decisions made in the Judge's Chamber of the Oatlands Supreme Court House, the life and death consequences of those decisions, and exactly what the judges had been looking at whilst cogitating. So, now we move on to 1856, at which point a refurbishment of the Judge's Chamber included re-papering the walls. The pattern chosen (see above) utilised a rococo sensibility which had been hugely popular in the 1830s. By 1855 this was ever so slightly out-of-date, a deliberate choice which reflected the gravity of a Supreme Court Judge's Chamber. And of course this grandeur was further enhanced by the careful use of aquamarine blue, a colour traditionally associated with rank and wealth.

Almost as soon as this wallpaper had been hung, the Supreme Court at Oatlands heard one of the most famous cases of 19<sup>th</sup> century Van Diemen's Land – the murder of George Sturgeon near Antill Ponds, of which the bushranger Richard 'Long Mick' Ennis stood accused.

## Introducing Long Mick

One of the last bushrangers to terrorise the midlands, Richard 'Long Mick' Ennis was neither the most brutal, nor the most successful bushranger, but his name lived on in the collective memory long after his execution at the Oatlands Gaol in 1857. And the reason for this is that he was widely believed, both then and decades later, to have been innocent of the crime for which he was hanged, dissected and anatomised (more on that later). He is also remarkable for having been imprisoned at Oatlands twice (a decade apart) and both times tried at the Oatlands Supreme Court.

Richard Ennis, an Irishman from County Kildare, came before the magistrates in March 1843 on a charge of vagrancy. At the time he was 27 years old, married for two months, and had previously been imprisoned for deserting from the army. Exactly how Ennis came to be a vagrant is unclear; but in 1840s Ireland vagrancy was taken very seriously. Ennis was unable to produce the statutory 10 shillings; consequently he was transported 'beyond the seas' for 7 years. He left behind a wife, Mary, of whom little is known beyond her abandonment.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> TAHO CON33/1/48 Richard Ennis per *Duke of Richmond*



Figure 2: Separate cells, Darlington Probation Station, Maria Island (Tasmanian Archive & Heritage Office)

Arriving in Van Diemen's Land in January 1844, Ennis was sent to the Maria Island Probation Station, and after being released from the first stage of probation, was moved to Westbury, where he lasted just three months before absconding. On being recaptured, he was sentenced to six months hard labour in chains, and moved to the Jericho road station. But Ennis had had enough of hard labour, and made yet another escape, this time with three other men from the station.

Having gotten away from the station, Ennis and his comrades waited for nightfall, then, still in their convict 'slops', attacked the hut of Jonas Pearson, a Jericho blacksmith. Using an axe, they broke through their victim's door, and holding the axe over the head of the unfortunate Pearson<sup>2</sup>, stole what little valuables they could find, including a coat worth 20 shillings<sup>3</sup>. Their run didn't last long; all four were recaptured in September 1845, and remanded to the Oatlands Gaol. Here they waited for a month; as runaway

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<sup>2</sup> The Courier 8 October 1845 p.3

<sup>3</sup> TAHO CON33/1/48

prisoners, they were shackled in 24 pound leg irons and held in the solitary cells.<sup>4</sup> The following month, all four were brought before the Oatlands Supreme Court and charged with burglary. Ennis' three comrades were acquitted, but Ennis himself was found guilty and sentenced to be transported for life.

So, having once been transported across the ocean to Van Diemen's Land, Richard Ennis now found himself transported again, this time to Norfolk Island, a remote and brutal penal establishment. Just months after his arrival, a section of the convicts revolted, and four minor officials were killed. Two months later, the notoriously harsh John Price became the Commandant of Norfolk Island, where Richard Ennis was to spend the next six years.



Figure 3: John Price, Commandant of Norfolk Island. Here he is portrayed as a bit of a dandy, but the inmates knew him as a sadistic taskmaster

Ennis' life sentence had been commuted to three years; the fact that he spent double that amount of time on the island was due to his continual offences against convict discipline. Among a long, long list, idleness appears very often, as does refusing to work

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<sup>4</sup> TAHO CSO24/87/1812 1849 Report on Gaols

and fighting. After endless stretches of hard labour, he was eventually returned to Van Diemen's Land in June 1852 as a probationary pass holder.

With his pass, Ennis entered into private employment. By now well and truly brutalised by the system, he lasted just three months with his new employer, before being sent back to hard labour for disobedience. He spent the next year in and out of the Launceston prisoners' barracks, frequently being handed even more terms of hard labour, until he absconded into the bush in October 1853. Over the next three years, he absconded another three times, and a pattern was established: bolt for the bush, get caught some time later, and then bolt for the bush again. In one instance, he managed to abscond a mere seven days after being sentenced for the previous escape.

Clearly Richard Ennis was determined in to live outside the system which he knew only too well to be brutal and cruel. But having escaped into the bush, how were such men to survive? For most, the only real answer was bushranging; they were already living outside the law, so regular employment was near impossible. This left only one option – to live by thievery, or any means that came to hand. And it is around this time that the name 'Long Mick' (Ennis was very tall, and Irish) became familiar to inhabitants of the Oatlands district as one of a band of marauding bushrangers.

In the mid-1850s, a number of bushrangers were roaming the area, committing armed robberies and occasional murders. 'Long Mick's comrades included 'Wingy' Stewart, Thomas 'Dido' Driscoll (a former Point Puer boy), and the notorious John 'Rocky' Whelan, who made a habit of shooting then robbing his victims.<sup>5</sup> The various gangs of bushrangers (which could be better described as loose alliances) mostly had bases around the Lakes, and operated on a system which had been in use since the early days of the colony.

For bushrangers to survive, a certain amount of connivance was required by both convicts and free, and many accounts attest to a kind of bush telegraph which warned of approaching police parties. Part of the problem was that in many cases, the bushrangers had a far greater knowledge of the bush (and how to survive in it) than the police pursuing them. Their approach was pretty simple: descend from their bush retreat into a settled area, hold up a homestead or traveller on the road, and return to their lair well before the police had any real hope of following them.

In the case of 'Long Mick', he appears to have spent time hiding out in the Lakes district, at 'The Den' near Bothwell, and in a cave near Antill Ponds. This cave, still known to locals as 'Long Mick's Cave', shows the marks of a chisel having been used by Ennis to cut a rough chimney into the roof, and the smoke blackened walls attest to its having been one of his favourite haunts<sup>6</sup>. Standing six feet one inch, a 'tall, rawboned man with dark hair and whiskers'<sup>7</sup>, Ennis must surely have made an alarming figure as bushranger when he emerged from his cave. Witnesses reported him carrying both rifle

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<sup>5</sup> R Minchin, *Bolters for the bush* (Hobart, 1996)

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Burbury, *Chronicles of Oatlands*, Chapter 7

<sup>7</sup> *Colonial Times*, 25 July 1857 pp2,3

and pistol, and dressed in 'moleskin trousers, a Scotch twilled shirt with a blue shirt over it', a 'cross-striped waistcoat' and oil skin coat.<sup>8</sup>

Although suspected of many hold ups, there is only one for which the details survive, and they cast a reasonably sympathetic light on Long Mick. In July 1856, three suspicious looking men arrived at Mr Wilson's house near Saltpan Plains. As later events disclosed, the three were Denis Doherty, Long Mick and an unnamed comrade. Armed to the teeth, the three raided the house, demanding that the occupants deliver up their valuables. But whilst they certainly put their victims in fear of their lives, the bushranging trio were far less brutal than they could have been. At one point, Doherty insisted on giving two children in the house a shilling each, the remainder of the loot from a post office they had just robbed. And Long Mick himself stepped in at the beginning of the hold up, saying (referring to the occupant's Irish wife) "don't hurt them, the woman is right eno' ".<sup>9</sup>

But Long Mick's luck could not last forever; bushranging as a career rarely ended well. Long Mick's luck was better than many; if all his escapes into the bush are added up, they come to several years as the 'terror of the midlands'. For Long Mick the final capture came in August 1857, by which time (at least for this bout) he had been living as an outlaw for 15 months.<sup>10</sup> For that whole time, Constable Hastie of the Oatlands Police had been detailed to apprehend Long Mick and his comrades.

In August 1857 Hastie and a party of police tracked Long Mick's oversized footprints to a hut near Bothwell. Ironically, when Constable Hastie called on Long Mick to come out, Long Mick (not realising that they knew his identity) refused to leave the hut, on the questionable grounds that he thought the police might be bushrangers. Needless to say, this ruse was a failure, and after a protracted exchange of fire between the bushranger and the police, Long Mick was taken into custody and lodged at the Oatlands Gaol.<sup>11</sup>

But his story doesn't end there. Constable Hastie and his party reported that, when finally arrested, Long Mick confessed to the murder of George Sturgeon, nearly a year prior, at a cross roads near Antill Ponds.

Part Two to follow....

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ennis' conduct record gives the date of his last absconding as 28<sup>th</sup> May 1856

<sup>11</sup> *The Courier* 24 August 1857 p2